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8. STATUS OF HOG DEER *AXIS PORCINUS* ZIMMERMANN IN LAKHIMPUR AND DHEMAJI DISTRICTS OF ASSAM¹

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The Hog Deer *Axis porcinus* Zimmermann was widely distributed in the plains of north-eastern India, especially in valleys of the Brahmaputra and Barak rivers, and Manipur. Over the years, the grasslands in the plains gave way to settlements and paddy cultivation, and the species was confined mainly to some of the protected areas only. However, in two districts of eastern Assam, Lakhimpur and Dhemaji, the Hog Deer is still found in scattered pockets outside the protected areas due to relatively low pressure of human population (Choudhury 1997). I report their relative status in 1989-1991 (I was posted at Dhakuakhana as SDO-civil), 1994-95 (I was posted at Lakhimpur as Project Director of rural development) and 2002 (short field trip) in these two districts.

In 1989-91, in Lakhimpur district (Fig. 1), the species was present in the Pabho Reserve Forest (RF), Borchapori, Kadam RF, chapories of the Subansiri river near Chowldhowaghat and many localities in Dhakuakhana subdivision (Choudhury 1991) (Matmota, Tekeliphuta, Lutachur, Basudeo, Andharu, Bordoibam-Bilmukh and Gohain chapori, Sampora near Ghilamora, Borkolia and stray animals elsewhere). Stray animals were also observed in Dulung, Kakoi and Ranga RFs, especially along the rivers. However, in all these pockets the number of the Deer was low, never exceeding 40-50. In Dhemaji district, however, large populations existed in Kobo chapori (>200), Bordoloni (>100), Poba RF, Jamjing RF (>50), Sengajan RF, Jiadhah RF, Subansiri RF, chapories near Sonarighat, Semen chapori, other chapories on the Brahmaputra river, and stray animals elsewhere. The total estimated population in Lakhimpur and Dhemaji was 250-300 and 550-650 respectively.

In 1994-95, in both Lakhimpur and Dhemaji districts,

the species was present in all the sites of 1989-91, but in slightly lesser numbers.

In 2002, significant changes were noticed in Lakhimpur district, the species was virtually absent from Pabho RF, with stray animals reported. In Borchapori and Kadam RF, the changed course of the Subansiri river had eroded the habitat to almost half. It was a case of 'river capture' where the small Ghagar river about 50 m wide was captured by the big Subansiri river about 500 m wide. The chapories of the Subansiri river near Chowldhowaghat and many localities in Dhakuakhana subdivision (Matmota, Tekeliphuta, Lutachur, Basudeo, Andharu, Borkolia and stray animals elsewhere), however, continued to hold small numbers of the Deer. The number in

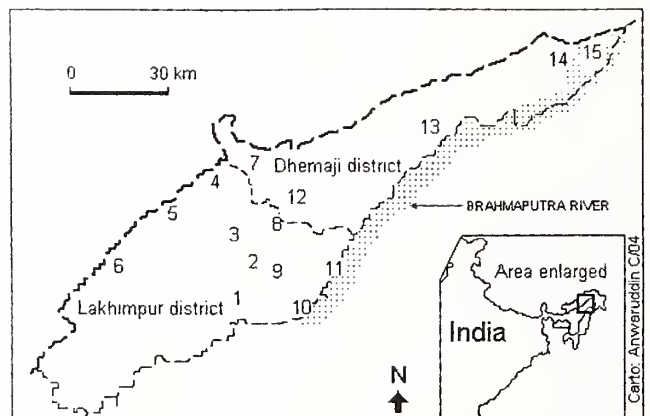


Fig. 1: Map showing some of the places mentioned in the text.

1. Pabho RF; 2. Borchapori; 3. Kadam RF; 4. Dulung RF;
5. Kakoi RF; 6. Ranga RF; 7. Subansiri RF;
8. Bordoibam-Bilmukh and Gohain chapori; 9. Basudeo;
10. Tekeliphuta; 11. Matmota; 12. Bordoloni;
13. Jamjing and Sengajan RFs; 14. Poba RF; 15. Kobo chapori

Sampora near Ghilamora was reduced to a few individuals, while those in Bordoibam-Bilmukh were almost extirpated. Stray animals were still observed in Dulung, Kakoi and Ranga RFs, especially along the rivers. Bordoibam-Bilmukh is a bird sanctuary and is partly in Lakhimpur and partly in Dhemaji districts; the main deer habitat was in Lakhimpur district. The entire grassland and reed bed along the western fringe of the Sanctuary was destroyed by a section of the villagers who were opposed to the declaration of a sanctuary. While a few deer could escape, the rest were killed for the pot. The survivors (about 20) are still seen in Gohain chapori towards west of Bordoibam-Bilmukh. In Dhemaji district, however, the populations continued to exist in the earlier sites, but in depleted numbers. Kobo chapori had suffered heavily in the flash flood in 2000 and there were fresh encroachments. The estimated numbers were <200. In Bordoloni also, the reed and grass cover had been reduced and the numbers may be <80, Poba RF, Jamjing RF (<40), Sengajan RF, Jiadhal RF, Subansiri RF, chapories near Sonarighat, Semen chapori, other chapories on the Brahmaputra river and stray animals elsewhere. The total estimated population in Lakhimpur and

Dhemaji was 150-200 and 450-550 respectively.

The population in Kobo chapori is contiguous with those in D'Ering Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh. Both these areas had a few hundred Hog Deer until 1980s.

The first major threat to the Hog Deer came at the end of 19th century when large number of people from Majuli area of Jorhat district and also from other parts of Jorhat and Sivasagar districts settled down by clearing grassland in the floodplains of Lakhimpur and Dhemaji. Then in early 20th century, a part of Lakhimpur was occupied by people from East Bengal; part of Pabho RF is also encroached. In the later part of the 20th century, some Bodo tribals from Assam-Nagaland border had moved into some parts of Dhemaji district after disturbance in the former area. They have occupied prime Hog Deer habitat such as Jamjing RF and Semen chapori.

Habitat destruction and poaching, with guns and snares, continue to be major threats. Each year, a chunk of the grassland is added to the mustard cultivation and unless conservation measures are taken, the future of the animal is bleak.

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9. FIRST SIGHTING OF WHITE-TAILED EAGLE *HALIAEETUS ALBICILLA* IN BUMDELING WILDLIFE SANCTUARY, BHUTAN¹

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The White-tailed Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla* is listed by BirdLife International (2004) as 'near threatened'. In the north-eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, including Bhutan, it is an occasional winter visitor moving upstream of larger rivers (Choudhury 2000; Inskipp *et al.* 2004). In Bhutan, it was recorded from the western part of the country in Punakha and Thimphu *dzongkhags* (*dzongkhag* = district) (Inskipp *et al.* 2004). I here report of a sighting in far eastern Bhutan in Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary (Fig. 1).

On January 18, 2006, I left Trashi Yangtze town (in Bhutan) before dawn and drove towards Bumdeling Wildlife Sanctuary to catch up with the roosting Black-necked Cranes *Grus nigricollis* that take off early in the morning. While returning, we noticed a large bird perched on a tree by the



Fig. 1: Map of Bhutan showing the locality of sighting